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SUBJECT: DEATH OF SULTAN ADDS TO POLITICAL TURMOIL

Classified By: Ambassador John Campbell for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: The tragic death of the Sultan of Sokoto and the subsequent politicking surrounding the naming of his replacement (Alhaji Sa'ad Abubakar, currently Nigeria's Military Attach in Pakistan, was named Sultan on November 2), are but the latest factors contributing to a climate of turmoil in Nigerian politics, according to Governor Attahiru Bafarawa of Sokoto State. Bafarawa, who is at the epicenter of northern Nigerian politics, did not put forward any conspiracy theories regarding the airplane crash in the private meeting with the Ambassador over dinner during an Embassy condolence visit to Sokoto on October 31. He did, however, suggest that the crash of the ADC jet, which killed the Sultan and many other Sokoto notables, exacerbated current political problems and provided yet another sign that Nigerian politics was entering a perpetual state of crisis.

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PAYING CONDOLENCES  
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12. (U) The Ambassador paid a condolence visit to Sokoto State, where he met with Governor Bafarawa, former President Shehu Shegari and the Emirate Council. In public remarks at the Palace of the Sultan, the Ambassador conveyed his sympathy and solidarity with the people of Nigeria, the families of the deceased, and the entire Nigerian Muslim community. The Ambassador privately expressed his condolences to President Shegari at his personal residence. Excerpts of his remarks at the Palace were broadcast on both the VOA and BBC Hausa Service newscast the following morning. Local and national television, radio and newspaper coverage were dominated by stories on the tragedy, visitors paying their condolences, and Sultan succession politics.

13. (U) Arriving via road on the Islamic Third Day of prayers for the deceased Sultan, the Ambassador paid his respects along with a handful of representatives of foreign countries including, the Moroccan Ambassador (who led a delegation of 70 Moroccans sent by the King on a chartered jet) and the Ambassador from Niger. A long list of Nigerian dignitaries including President Obasanjo, Vice President Atiku, former presidents Babangida and Abubakar, former National Security Advisor, Aliyu Muhammad Gusau and the governors of many northern states were also present or had paid condolence visits. Former President Buhari, the British High Commission and other western ambassadors were expected later in the week.

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THE RATIONALE FOR CHOOSING A NEW SULTAN  
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14. (C) In a wide-ranging, one hour meeting with the Ambassador late in the evening on October 31, Governor Barfarawa indicated that he was under tremendous pressure from the President in making his selection of the new Sultan.

As the spiritual leader of Nigeria's 60 million Muslims, the position has significant religious and political importance, and has been a point of contention between previous presidents, religious leaders and political leaders from Sokoto State. A previous Sultan, Ibrahim Dasuki, who was seen as a strong and Independent leader, for example, had been removed in the 1990s by Nigeria's then military dictator, Sani Abacha. Dasuki had been named Sultan by President Babangida, who is now a close ally of Bafarawra.

15. (C) The Governor, in response to a question about whether there was any "pressure from the Federal Government" became animated and told the Ambassador that he would "act on his conscience" in choosing the next Sultan despite the pressure. The process, he said, involved a formal nomination process among the four competing families who are eligible to offer candidates. The nominees from each family are then forwarded to the "Kingmakers," committee of the Emirate Council, who then whittle the nominees down to three names, which are then sent to the Governor, who is ultimately responsible, in consultation with the council for making the final decision, Bafararwa explained.

16. (C) In sketching out scenarios, Governor Bafarawa shared some of his thinking with the Ambassador when he described the large extended family of the Sultan (he has fathered at least 80 children) and asked, rhetorically, whether it would be "fair" to dislodge the current ruling Sultanate family and replace him with a candidate from another lineage, all because of the plane crash. The message was clear; he was determined to choose a successor from the same family, something he did two days later on November 2, when he named Alhaji Sa'ad Abubakar, the brother of the deceased Sultan Maccido, as the successor.

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PDP CONVENTION A TEST FOR OBASANJO, BABANGIDA TO ENTER FRAY  
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17. (C) After accepting the Ambassador's condolences and discussing succession politics in the Caliphate, the Governor offered his analysis of Nigerian presidential succession politics. He said that the upcoming PDP convention will offer an important litmus test into the President's thinking about what is next. The Ambassador opened discussion of the topic with the observation that he had not met a single northern politician who disagreed with the notion that the next president should come from the north. Bafarawa concurred and noted that the President is aware of this as well, although his thinking on whether he will support a northern PDP candidate remains in question.

18. (C) Bafarawa noted that the northern block in the PDP is disadvantaged because of the defection of many former party members from the North who have jumped to other parties in at least seven states. As a result, he said the delegates from the various southern zones, constitute a clear numerical majority. The President, he said, could easily use this to his advantage to ram through a candidate from any of the southern zones, with only minimal opposition within the party. Bafarawa said that should he do this, it would up the political ante, and be an incontrovertible signal that President Obasonjo planned to stay in power, beyond his current legal mandate, benefitting from the political confusion that a southern PDP candidate would cause.

19. (C) Another scenario, equally unacceptable, Bafarawa said, would be the imposition of an "unacceptable northern candidate". He suggested that governors who supported the President's effort to get a third term or were silent on the matter would not be acceptable to the north. In this context he mentioned Gov. Ahmed Markarfi of Kaduna State, who he also suggested lacked enough experience or gravitas, and Governor Saminu Turaki of Jigawa, whom he dismissed as coming from a

small and politically insignificant state, which was like governing "a local government area".

¶10. (C) In order to test President Obasanjo's preferences, Bafarawa indicated that the former president, Ibrahim Babangida would pick up his nomination form next week, and seek to participate in the PDP convention in December. The entry of Babangida into the PDP sweepstakes, would present, Bafarawa said, a viable and acceptable Northern candidate, and put another major player in the competition to be on the top of the party's ticket. Northerners, Bafarawa said, would watch carefully how Babangida was treated as an indication of President Obasanjo's intentions.

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MUM ON HIS POLITICAL FUTURE...  
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¶11. (C) Although he did not talk about his own personal political future (he is finishing his second term as governor), Bafarawa did seem to be at the head of a gubernatorial caucus that was ongoing during the Ambassador's visit. At a dinner for the Ambassador, without advance notice, the governors of Kebbi, Jigawa, Borno and the former military governor of Sokoto state suddenly appeared and were seated around the table. Over a traditional Nigerian meal shared with the Ambassador, the group did not present any unified positions, but they were friendly and interested in maintaining direct contact with the Ambassador, something he urged them to do.

¶12. (C) Although Bafarawa did not give any hints about his own political future, he did talk about his party, the Democratic People's Party (DPP), which he said was formed to be part of a larger opposition coalition. The party, he said, like most others would attempt to hold the party congress after that of the PDP in order to react to the decisions of the country's dominant party.

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BUT AGGRESSIVELY DEFENDS HIS RECORD  
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¶13. (C) Governor Bafarawa also launched into a spirited defense of his reputation as one of the best performing state chief executives. He outlined the recent allegations against him by the Code of Conduct Tribunal, which said he was guilty of not filing an accurate personal asset declaration form, after being one of a handful of governors given a clean bill of health by the EFCC. The specific allegations by the Code of Conduct Tribunal was that he did not declare or justify a house he owns in London.

¶14. (C) Bafarawa said he got the money to buy the London

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property through the sale of an Abuja property to the Nigerian Government, though former National Security Advisor, Mohammed Aliyu Gusau for 100,000,000 naira. The House was bought to house a deposed Nigerian dictator, he said. The proceeds from the sale was used to buy the London property, which he properly declared. He said the allegations are an underhanded attempt to smear him, and were symptomatic of President Obasanjo's strategy of using government anti-corruption institutions to harass and intimidate political opponents.

¶15. (C) Comment: Gov. Bafarawa clearly believes that the President intends to manipulate the PDP convention to choose a candidate from the south. He also believes that this scenario is likely to lead to a full scale political crisis. Despite a level of competition among ambitious Northern governors, there appears to be unified opposition to the alleged plans of the President. The tragic death of Sultan Maccido added to the country's roiling politics, but also provided an opportunity for a who's who of northern

politicians to meet and caucus in anticipation of the gathering political storm.

CAMPBELL